The Dynamics of Oscillation between the Self and the Representation:
The Construction of Female Subjectivity in Augusta Webster's Dramatic Monologue Form

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Ever since the genre's initial introduction in the field of literary criticism, establishing a set of definitive features for the dramatic monologue has been at best elusive. Nevertheless, despite the failure of forming a consensus on its definition, the "umbrella term 'dramatic monologue'," (69) as Cornelia Pearsall explains, has held its practical usefulness in literary criticism. "What, then, might be the use of a generic term, and specifically, how does the umbrella term 'dramatic monologue' contribute to our reading of these poems?" (69): Pearsall's question makes an insightful suggestion on the nature of the dramatic monologue that, instead of burying oneself in the problem of how to define the dramatic monologue or which poem qualifies as one, it might be much more productive to make an inquiry on what kind of effects the genre creates, and what its implications might be. The earliest and arguably the most influential attempt in this has been that of Robert Langbaum, who has suggested the "combination of sympathy and judgment" (91) aroused in the reader's mind is the unique effect of the dramatic monologue. However, recent criticism on the genre is addressing the limitations in Langbaum's frame of analysis, producing valid new observations on the

effects and significance of the dramatic monologue as well as widening the literary canon of the genre; namely, the dramatic monologue as the interplay between self and context which inevitably serves as a social critique. In this revisionist approach to the genre, the (re)discovery of the women writers' dramatic monologue has claimed a key position in developing critical discussion.

This essay mainly analyzes Augusta Webster's "The Happiest Girl in the World" focusing on the elaborate interplay between the female subject and the patriarchal society containing her. The female speakers in *Portraits* dramatize their incompliance with the contemporary Victorian ideology as they problematize and interrogate the cultural representations of women, including the prevalent social discourse on the "problem" of the redundant woman and the fallen woman. However, their monologues do not constitute a simple diagram of the self against the oppressive society. Whereas each speaker articulates her anxiety, frustration, and even critical awareness against the patriarchal ideology, she also delineates her susceptibility to the discursive representation as her speech betrays her internalized sentiments and desires inculcated by the very social norms she strives to resist. The female self repudiates the prevailing representations on the female, but the repudiated representation is revealed to be indivisible from the self. Webster's female speakers oscillate between contradictory, ambivalent positions of defying and conforming to the social ideology, maintaining an unstable division in their self-image. Nonetheless, although each speaker is denied of socioeconomic breakthrough, it might be misleading to conclude altogether that their monologue eventually comes to a weary standstill. It is the dynamism of the oscillation that the speaker's performance finally dramatizes: rather than a pessimistic vision toward any social change, each monologue demonstrates a critical understanding of the relationship between the self and the social discourse.

"The Umbrella Term 'Dramatic Monologue'"

Early criticisms on the dramatic monologue made efforts to create a set rubric for the genre based on the formal features of some of Robert Browning's poetry. However, opposing the critical practice of making an "exclusive concern with objective criteria" (71) based on the "mechanical resemblance," (71) Robert Langbaum, in his influential criticism, has suggested instead "we consider its effect, its *way* of meaning," (71-72) focusing instead on the genre's effect on the reader. According to Langbaum, the dramatic monologue is distinctive in that "we understand the speaker of the dramatic monologue by sympathizing with him, and yet by remaining aware of the moral judgment we have suspended for the sake of understanding" (91). Langbaum assigns the "combination of sympathy and judgment" (91) aroused in the reader as the dramatic monologue's unique capability. Although Langbaum's analysis has been prevalent in the understanding of the genre, a recent body of criticisms on the dramatic monologue has pointed out the limitations of his criticism and seeks to define the effects of the genre from different perspectives. For example, Cynthia Scheinberg raises a fundamental question on Langbaum's idea of the "sympathy and judgment." She comments Langbaum has made a tacit assumption that a reader's response to a poem would be essentially universal and identical. Rereading Langbaum's criticism on the dramatic monologue from a feminist perspective, Scheinberg points out that "a reader's capacity for sympathy is almost always linked to a reader's cultural, political, and gendered identity" (176), and that the reader's poetic identification and ethical judgment in reading the dramatic monologue might vary accordingly.

Furthermore, recent criticisms tend to focus on the performative aspect of the dramatic monologue as its key feature. Noting Langbaum

and his successors' negligence in the "discursive, even conversational, nature" (68) of the genre, Cornelia Pearsall engages in the "performative element of the dramatic monologue, the methods by which these discursive forays, these words, accomplish various goals—some apparent, other subtle and less readily perceptible" (67). For Pearsall, the dramatic monologue's effects are far more complex than Langbaum's dichotomy of sympathy and judgment. With its "assumption of rhetorical efficacy" (68), the dramatic monologue and its speakers strive for a "dramatic transformation of a situation or a self" (72). While Pearsall's idea of the dramatic monologue's performative effect focuses on the "substantive" effects and ends which the poem or the speaker, or even both of them, seek to produce within or without the text, E. Warwick Slinn offers another perspective of reading the dramatic monologue as performative. Employing critical theories on performativity and "double operation of speech-acts as both descriptive and constitutive," (5) Slinn explains the dramatic monologue as a linguistic process of the construction of the speaker's identity within the cultural ideology. For Slinn, each speaker of the dramatic monologue is subject to his or her language, which is contingent on the historical context and the contemporary discourse. Thus, the dramatic monologue not only describes the speaker's thoughts and situation but also constructs the speaker always in relation to the surrounding discourse system. In this process, the dramatic monologue serves as a cultural critique, "working from within established discursive practices in order to expose their assumptions" (4): "These poems show how deliberately conceived performative language may focus central cultural issues in an era, since, while determinedly tied to the terms of specific speech acts, their themes encompass several of the significant debates in mid-nineteenth-century England" (6). It might be helpful to compare Slinn's view of the dramatic monologue with that of Glennis Byron published in the same year, who seems to share a surprisingly

similar perspective although put differently:

> Context is crucial to the dramatic monologue as we now understand it since it is precisely the dynamic of self and context which reveals the fixed and essential self to be in fact fragmented, composite, and the product of a particular set of socio-cultural conditions. (84)

In her critique on the genre of the dramatic monologue, the combination made in the confrontation between "sympathy and judgment" as Langbaum analyzed as the key feature of the genre transforms into that between "self and context," shifting the focus from the dynamics within the reader to that within the text and its contemporary cultural discourse.

Byron's revisionist approach on the dramatic monologue, as well as those of other critics mentioned above, has partly been made available because of the rediscovery of woman poets and the expansion of the canon in the genre. Once considered a "masculine" genre created and utilized by male poets such as Robert Browning and Tennyson, criticism of the dramatic monologue came to embrace broader and more complex discussions thanks to the rise of feminist criticism, rediscovery of woman writers, and the widening of the canon. Before the major rediscovery of Victorian woman poets by gynocritics, Dorothy Mermin, maintaining that Victorian woman poets developed a different and separate poetic tradition from the "mainstream" tradition of Victorian poetry, observed that woman poets engaged in the form of dramatic monologue less than men, and if they did, the result was fundamentally different from men's: "where men's poems have two sharply differentiated figures—in dramatic monologues, the poet and the dramatized speaker—in women's poems the two blur together. . . . the women's dramatic monologues were expected to be, and were almost always perceived as being, univocal" (76). For Mermin, in light of the frame of "sympathy and judgment,"

the dramatic monologues by Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Christina Rossetti were too sympathetic to the speaker to be considered effective.

As more woman writers, such as Felicia Hemans, Augusta Webster, and Letitia Elizabeth Landon, were rediscovered and more feminist critics engaged in the issue, the discussion of the woman's dramatic monologue defied the stereotypical assumption of the genre as a "male" poetry and expanded a new prospect in the genre. Isobel Armstrong argues that the dramatic monologue was in fact an apt form for Victorian woman poets who questioned the social and literary norms and sought to "revolutionise" (316) them from within, "to explore the way a female subject comes into being" (316). As mentioned above, Scheinberg problematizes the long-established frame of sympathy and judgment by criticizing the assumption of the male-centered readership as universal and points out the dangerousness of positioning women's poetry as separate from the "mainstream" tradition, urging to take up the "challenge of rethinking generic definitions as well as discovering 'lost' women writers" (188) as doing so will allow us "to construct the Victorian woman poet as an agent of literary history" (188). In this context, Glennis Byron responds to and revises Mermin's earlier observation of the woman's dramatic monologue: if woman poets' dramatic monologues generally sympathize more with the speaker than those of the male poets', it is because "their target is more usually the systems that produce the speakers than the speakers themselves" (87). Similar to Slinn's idea of the dramatic monologue as performativity and cultural critique, Byron argues that woman poets of the dramatic monologue "frequently exploit the strategy of inhabiting the conventional in order to expose it" (88). According to Byron's view, as an interplay between the self and the context, woman's dramatic monologue is specialized in critically exploring the relationship between the speaker and the society:

> The doubleness or discursive splitting that is considered characteristic of the dramatic monologue is produced here not only through the split between poet and speaker but more importantly through the speaker's internalisation of the ideology that defines her. (88)

As the dramatic monologue provides a "subjective account of her own situation" (88) which is "simultaneously offered to us for objective analysis" (88), it serves as "both a demonstration and a critique of the cultural conditions that have produced the speaker" (88), as an elaborate social commentary. By redefining the effect of the dramatic monologue as the interplay between the self and the context and analyzing woman poet's dramatic monologue in this light, Byron legitimately establishes them within the tradition of the dramatic monologue, as well as expanding the literary potential of the genre itself.

Augusta Webster's poetry is befitting to read in light of these revised perspectives on the genre of dramatic monologue. Webster, a passionate advocate for women's education and social activist in women's suffragist movement, wrote dramatic monologues with speakers both from mythical backgrounds and contemporary Victorian society. In tellingly named *Portraits,* she portrays monologues of female speakers who are inextricably related to, and keenly engages in, the contemporary Victorian discourses on women. Byron's and Slinn's analysis of the dramatic monologue as a form interrogating the relationship between the self and the social discourse which serves as a social critique might be especially helpful in reading Webster's dramatic monologues. One might raise concerns for reading Webster's poetry with an assumption of a strong authorial presence as a female writer. Angela Leighton responds to this question in opposition to the idea of the "death of the author" that, in feminist criticism's point of view, the "authority" of the female author, "far from having to die, has not yet been brought to life in the reader's consciousness" (*Victorian Women Poets* 4): "To ignore the authorial name,

and all the historical and biographical information that goes with it, would be to lose, not only an already lost history of women's writing, but also the rationale for writing about women poets at all" (4). Also, the historical and biographical background and the women's poetry "are not necessarily either causally related or obviously compatible, but neither are they, therefore, totally unrelated and different" (4). In addition, Mary Poovey's insightful analysis on the relationship between "women as historical agents . . . and woman—the historically specific representation of the female that mediates the relationship of women and men to every individual, concrete woman" (29) suggests we need not ignore the presence of the female author as a historical agent who reproduces and engages in the contemporary representations on women. In this view, considering the historical context in relation to the female author is fundamental to feminist literary criticism. Poovey argues that even though the dominant representation of women initially limits and contains the historical woman's self-representation, the woman as historical agent might exceed it by elaborating its innate contradiction (43) by giving an example of the dominant discourse on prostitutes and the Contagious Diseases Acts in the 1840s, which is also an issue Augusta Webster's poetry actively engages in. It might be said that the interactive relationship between the historical agent and the discursive representation is precisely what is dramatized by Webster and her dramatic monologues.

"The Happiest Girl in the World," or, the Girl Who Does Not Know Herself

"The Happiest Girl in the World," as the title alludes, is the monologue of a bride-to-be who has been just engaged for a week. However, as the speaker avails herself of her betrothed's absence, "almost glad / To have him now gone" (7-8) to begin her monologue as the drama-

tized form of her examination the inner self, the title soon proves to be deeply ironic: uncertain whether "if [hers] is love enough for him" (11), or whether she wants the marriage at all, the speaker is hardly the happiest girl in the world. Behind the marriage of the "happiest girl in the world" looms the anxiety of the redundant woman that dominated the contemporary Victorian middle-class discourse. As Sheila Jeffreys notes, "The 1851 census revealed that there were 405,000 more women than men in the population. They were described in the press as 'excess' or 'surplus' women and in the 1860s to 1880s the 'problem' of 'surplus' women caused great alarm amongst male commentators" (86). One of the most representative was W. R. Greg, whose comment on the issue is indicative of the nature of the contemporary discourse of the redundant woman:

> . . . there is an enormous and increasing number of single women in the nation, a number quite disproportionate and quite abnormal; a number which, positively and relatively, is indicative of an unwholesome social state, and is both productive and prognostic of much wretchedness and wrong. There are hundreds of thousands of women—not to speak more largely still—scattered through all ranks, but proportionally most numerous in the middle and upper classes, who have to earn their own living, instead of spending and husbanding the earnings of men; who, not having the natural duties and labours of wives and mothers, have to carve out artificial and painfully-sought occupations for themselves; who, in place of completing, sweetening, and embellishing the existence of others, are compelled to lead an independent and incomplete existence of their own. (5)

Greg identifies the "disproportionate" and "abnormal" number of single women as mainly a middle- and upper-class issue that threatens the ideology of female domesticity. The idea of a huge number of respectable women who are bereft of the bliss of marriage and domestic life was dis-

quieting for the contemporary Victorian society, whose ideology dictated that women should belong to the domestic sphere and be economically dependent on the husband. Women's redundancy statistically indicated that a great number of women should be inevitably, structurally left out of the normative life cycles prescribed for them. Pauline Simonsen points out that the issue was primarily a bourgeois one concerning the fate of the middle class women who had little chance of economic independence, while "[t]he great majority of surplus women were working class, who could generally occupy positions as economic units more readily than their higher class sisters" (509). As a social construction, the discourse of the redundant woman, although originated from a statistical research, seems to have strengthened the middle-class domestic ideology rather than undermined it, since it consolidated the ideological normativity of marriage by arousing social anxiety with its deficiency.

It might be said, from a Foucauldian point of view, that it was the prevalent social discourse of the redundant woman which, in a way, actually constructed the social problem of redundancy and "produced" the redundant women in reality. As the social concern for spinsters who could not marry increased, the social significance of marriage for middle-class women inevitably increased. Despite the antithetical women's movement of defying the domestic ideology (Jeffreys 87), the discourse of the redundant woman culturally endorsed women's fear for not being chosen as well as gladness for being chosen by a man for marriage; it made the women immerse themselves in embodying and internalizing the ideological norms and representations on women in competition to each other, in order to be chosen as an ideal wife-to-be. In sum, the discourse of the redundant woman constructed the crisis of redundancy for the middle-class women as well as the female subjects who desperately embodied domestic ideals, ever narrowing the distance between the self and the discursive representation prescribed by the Victorian ideology.

This problem of the immeasurably close, perhaps even indistinguishable, distance between the self and the representation is what Webster's bride-to-be in the "Happiest Girl in the World" is facing.

The speaker in "The Happiest Girl in the World" is aware of the dissonance between what she feels and what the society anticipates, or prescribes, her to feel. This awareness is characterized by her wish that she may "make myself believe it all is true" (12). In spite of the contemporary discourse of companionate marriage as an extension of romantic love, the speaker cannot be certain of her love towards her husband-to-be; despite her engagement, she is "not so sad and not so gay" (17). As she searches for her moment of falling in love with her fiancé, the ensuing questions rhetorically support that she has had no definitive moment of falling in love with him: on the moment of the marriage proposition, she "did not think [she] could quite love him yet" (24). The questions about her love—"And did I love him then with all my heart?" (25), "And did I love him from the day we met?" (29), "And did I love him when he first came here?" (32)—indicate her uncertainty of her love. The question "When did I love him? How did it begin?" (35) is a crucial one that must be answered for her marriage, and one her betrothed has answered, too. Whereas the speaker is left to wonder "But how can I tell when my love began?" (42), her fiancé "knows when he loved [her]" (48), describing the exact moment that he decided to have her as wife. Faced with the anxiety that she cannot answer the fundamental question, thus the potential that she might not love him enough and be happy as anticipated, the speaker utilizes a defense mechanism that, although she cannot locate the exact moment she fell in love, she "should have answered 'No'" (96) had her betrothed been impatient and made the proposition sooner. By being glad for his patience in waiting for her to be prepared for his proposition and supposing the situation where "I should have been startled and not known / How he is just the one man I

can love" (93-94), the speaker conversely assures herself that "he is just the one man I can love."

However, the following imagery to demonstrate the necessity of her falling in love with him ironically implies the fact that her volition was irrelevant in the scenario of courtship and marriage. After mentioning her betrothed waiting for her to be prepared for the proposition, the speaker employs the imagery of nature to suggest both his patience and her necessary love for him:

> He waited as you wait the reddening fruit
> Which helplessly is ripening on the tree,
> And not because it tries or longs or wills,
> Only because the sun will shine on it:
> But he who waited was himself that sun. (100-04)

Here, the speaker utilizes the image of the "reddening fruit" just ripe for reciprocating love and accepting the proposition of marriage to demonstrate her betrothed's patience for her. As in her previous use of the imagery of the gradual transformations in nature to answer "When did I love him? How did it begin?" (35), such as "small green spikes of snowdrops in the spring" (36), "June rosebuds" (39), and "young pale twilight star" (43), the ripening of the fruit is part of the transformations of nature which is inevitable and irreversible. The fruit will be ripe; the suitor will earn his reward for his patience. Does this "reddening fruit," or a girl ripening for marriage, then, have her own volition in the act of being ripe? Such is the question the speaker, consciously or not, cannot help but raise while she expresses her gladness in her fiancé's considerate patience for her: without agency of its own, the fruit "helplessly is ripening on the tree, / . . . not because it tries or longs or wills, / Only because the sun will shine on it." On the other hand, the speaker's choice of words represents the sun as if it is willfully intent on ripening the

fruit. The natural laws dictate, in both senses of the word, that fruits ripen regardless of its intent. This imagery problematizes the speaker's (presumed) love for her fiancé and consent to marriage because it implies that her "ripeness," for which her betrothed has been patiently waiting, has also been composed to the exclusion of her own agency in it.

This implication is all the more unsettling because in her case it is not the natural laws that have dictated her to be ready for marriage with a man: instead of the sun, a synecdoche for the laws of nature that ripens fruit, for the speaker, "he who waited was himself that sun." It indicates it was the fiancé's waiting presence that has made her, regardless of her intent, ready to marry him—even love him. The image of the sunshine upon the speaker, previously cited from the betrothed's description of the moment he fell in love with her, tellingly resonates here with the speaker's recognition that he himself has been the sun: "'I see my wife; this is my wife who comes, / And seems to bear the sunlight on with her'" (63-64). The moment he sees her in the sunlight, he decides that he shall take her as wife, like the sun that "will shine on" the fruit for the inevitable moment of its full ripeness. In this analogy, the speaker's development of love for her suitor and acceptance of proposition is naturalized as something that happens both necessarily and spontaneously, circling her back to the unsolvable question of "When did I love him? How did it begin?" (35).

However, the speaker is confronted by the doubt that her love falls short of what is anticipated from the bride-to-be, as the idea of a woman's love itself is constructed by conflicting but concurrent cultural discourses.

> Oh, was it worth the waiting? Was it worth?
> For I am half afraid love is not love,
> This love which only makes me rest in him

> And be so happy and so confident,
> This love which makes me pray for longest days
> That I may have them all to use for him,
> This love which almost makes me yearn for pain
> That I might have borne something for his sake,
> This love which I call love, is less than love. (105-13)

The speaker's love for her betrothed is characterized by satisfaction in total dependence on her husband and self-sacrificial dedication toward him, which faithfully follows the Victorian domestic ideology of an obedient, devotional "angel in the house." As Patricia Rigg points out, the "the specific tropes through which the strong social subtext in this poem arises are those of the pastoral ideal—the simple purity of the word, thought, and feeling that assume contentment with one's lot" (*Julia Augusta Webster* 130). However, the speaker feels "this love which I call love, is less than love," since she feels that her love lacks crucial characteristics prescribed for a woman soon to enter a companionate marriage:

> Where are the fires and fevers and the pangs?
> Where is the anguish of too much delight,
> And the delirious madness at a kiss,
> The flushing and the paling at a look,
> And passionate ecstasy of meeting hands?
> Where is the eager weariness at time
> That will not bate a single measured hour
> To speed to us the fair-off wedding-day? (114-21)

The speaker's confusion on her feelings aggravates because the model of companionate marriage that supports the Victorian middle-class domesticity requires her to embody conflicting ideals. On the one hand, the girl/bride/wife is an asexual, innocent, and infantilized figure "like a child" (122), but the cultural discourse on romantic love as a prerequisite for companionate marriage requires a more passionate form of love

that is essentially erotic in nature. Having internalized the norms of the domestic angel, the speaker has also educated herself of the prevalent cultural code of the romantic love as passionate yearning: she describes the element of romantic love which she lacks as "That subtle pain of exquisite excess, / That momentary infinite sharp joy, / I know by books but cannot teach my heart" (145-47). This ambivalent understanding of love of the speaker has caused the critics to split on the matter of the speaker's sexuality. While Helen Luu reads the speaker's lack of passion as Webster's strategy of "enfreakment" that presents the unfeeling bride as grotesque and problematizes the "conventions of romantic love" (94), Rigg and Armstrong largely shares the idea that the speaker's passion is thwarted by the ideology of women's sexual innocence, whether the reason is "her own perception of a wifely ideal" (Rigg, *Julia Augusta Webster* 131) or the "thinness of the culture's language of sexuality" (Armstrong 365).

However, the speaker's psychology is much more complex than a mere dichotomy of the self and the social norms, whether the latter be that of sexual innocence or romantic love. The problem the speaker is faced with is that both are involved in the construction of her (a)sexuality. As the speaker cites the language of the romantic love, the originally pastoral and placid tone is uplifted in an ecstatic summons. It reveals that the speaker has been acutely anticipating the passionate emotions she is describing. Simultaneously, however, she acknowledges that she does not feel them for her betrothed. Her passionate yearning is not for her husband-to-be, but for the cultural ideal of the passionate love itself, revealing that, as well as the ideal of the wife's sexual innocence, the emotion of passionate love is a social construct. Although the speaker fails to feel the latter for her fiancé, surrounded by the discourses on women entering marriage, she is still at once asexual and desirous. It is impossible to distinguish which one of the two is the "real" speaker separate

from the discursive influence, let alone draw a clear line between the former and the latter. Because the seemingly incompatible two discourses on women's love construct the speaker's emotion and (lack of) desire, she cannot decide whether she loves him or not. Adrift between the irreconcilable idea of love with "a child's heart" (130) and that of "a woman's" (131), she is left to doubt the adequacy of her love: "Alas am I too cold, am I too dull, / Can I not love him as another could?" (132-33) Finally, she seeks comfort in defining her love in terms of her betrothed's interpretation: "yet I think my love must needs be love, Since he can read me through" (148-49). Faced with the constant failure of determining her emotion in terms of her own feelings, her love is finally defined and prescribed by men's understanding of the narrative of courtship and the male gaze.

Divided in an ambivalent position, the speaker is confronted with the problem of the impossibility of pinpointing her own emotions. She can assert neither love nor indifference toward her betrothed. In spite of her lack of passion, she is clearly fond of her fiancé, demonstrating the discursive representations of an ideal wife as she prays to be wholly dependent to him, imagines to "Be flower and sweetness to him" (183), growing and nurturing in him, and desires to have him to herself. However, these feelings are always associated with violation or transgression of the form of love required of the bride. Like two sides of the same coin, the imagery of the "flower and sweetness" that "Grow, grow, and blossom out and fill the air, / Feed on his richness" (184-85) is the result of the "feathery wind-wasted seed" (170) being "thralled" (172) and "prisoned" (175) into a static life of marriage. Her desire to "be all for him" (241) is linked with her reluctance to bear children against the ideal of motherhood. Critics tend to focus on the speaker's refusal of motherhood and interpret it as part of Webster's social critique. Armstrong points out that the poem makes a "double critique," (365) suggesting that "the

speaker is unable to admit to her lack of maternal feeling because the cultural pressure silences her—and she has also been too infantilized in preparation for being a child wife to be able to have maternal feelings" (365); Luu insists "Webster reveals the monstrosity of the ideal itself: it not only produces freak forms of femininity but also enfreaks the one form of femininity deemed to be the most natural for woman" (96).

As a demonstration of the speaker's situation and the critique on the cultural ideology, "The Happiest Girl in the World" portrays both the divisions between the self and the ideology, and that between the split selves which have never been apart from the ideology. The divided speaker's anxious ambivalence is epitomized in the line where she acknowledges the ambivalence of her prospects of married life: "Yes, let me laugh a moment—maybe weep" (210), which soon develops into a negative form that cancels out the active reaction of either laughing or weeping:

> But no, but no, not laugh; for through my joy
> I have been wise enough to know the while
> Some tears and some long hours are in all lives,
> In every promised land some thorn-plants grow,
> Some tangling weeds as well as laden vines:
> And no, not weep; for is not my land fair,
> My land of promise flushed with fruit and bloom?
> And who would weep for fear of scattered thorns?
> And very thorns bear oftentimes sweet fruits. (211-19)

The speaker demonstrates her ambivalent position toward her imminent marriage by refuting the positive prospective of her married life with the negative and refuting the negative with the positive. She represents her marriage as a "promised land" with "thorn-plants" among the flowers. The "joy" of "promised land" is canceled by the anticipation of the "thorn-plants" as she suspends her thoughts with the line "But no,

but no, not laugh," while the gloomy vision of the "thorn-plants" is canceled out by the "land of promise" with "And no, not weep." What started as an anxious, desperate attempt to comfort herself develops into an imagination that prevents her from either laughing or weeping. The speaker's ambivalence toward her future, and her inner division, seems to conclude in a passive, weary state of standstill.

Webster's Dramatic Monologue as a Social Critique

The "portrait" of "The Happiest Girl in the World" discloses the unsettling interplay between self and society, in which the self is never separate from the ideological discourse even when it self-consciously seeks to be apart from it. The final "solution" the speaker employs is an attempt to suture the division by complying to the social norm; like a self-hypnotization or a performance of a self-fulfilling prophecy, the speaker repeats invoking her betrothed as in an incantation: "My love, my love, my love!" (195); "My love, my love, / I know it will be so" (226). However, as her affectation of indifference for her betrothed seem to fail at the end of the poem as her quiet rejoicing leaves her resolution unfinished—"And I will carelessly—Oh, his dear step— / He sees me, he is coming; my own love!" (265-66)—the speaker's compliance to the social norm cannot guarantee her conscious inner self intact. Rigg observes that at the end of the poem the speaker comes to a full "awareness that the construction of herself as wife is at odds with an inner self who resists this construction" ("Augusta Webster" 90), and that she makes a conscious decision to imitate the norms anticipated of her, keeping her true inner feelings separate from the superficial conventionality:

> Ultimately, this portrait takes its final from through the speaker's sobering enactment of her own duplicity. She understands all too well

> the images that conflate the happiest girl with the wife-to-be in order to suppress the true female subject. (*Julia Augusta Webster* 131-32)

However, what the inner plight of the "The Happiest Girl in the World" dramatizes is that, despite the dissonance which the self feels between herself and the discursive representation, there is no "inner self" nor "true female subject" to resist it or willfully embody it merely as an affectation. Armstrong more aptly explains Webster's description of the relationship between the female subject and the social discourse as follows:

> Augusta Webster works through intensely analytical psychological exploration which discloses contradictions in the construction of female subjectivity. She is fascinated by those areas where we have no language or where language cannot exist in any richness, because of social constraints. (365)

"The Happiest Girl in the World" dramatizes an inner conflict of a bride-to-be who feels happy and unhappy about her marriage at the same time. What complicates her issue is that the speaker, in her historically contingent surroundings, is contained by the discursive representation; and because she is contained by the representation, she cannot gain a clear apprehension of her "true" feelings over her own marriage. Occasionally, in short moments, she discovers that she does not coincide with the representation prescribed by the society, but she cannot fully articulate her critical awareness as her language, modes of thoughts and of expressions, are, again, constructed within the containment and constraints of the social discourse that produces the female subject. The speaker, divided and ambivalent, oscillates between the discursive representation that reproduces her and the uncharted territory of the self-awareness of the dissonance from the discursive prescription. By

dramatizing the contradiction of the self, Webster enables a critical understanding of the relationship between the self and the society and the construction of the female subject.

Nevertheless, it would be misleading to read Webster's dramatic monologues as pessimistic works that altogether deny the agency of their subjects. Webster develops her keen sense of social critique on the relationship between the self and the representation in her successive poems in *Portraits*. The two poems after "The Happiest Girl in the World," "A Castaway" and "Faded," deals with the similar problem of female speakers deeply enmeshed in the contemporary Victorian discourse on women: "A Castaway" is a monologue of a prostitute who critically engages in the various discourse on the fallen woman, redundant woman, and their socioeconomic conditions, while "Faded" is a monologue of an old spinster looking into a painting of her younger self, who criticizes the Victorian ideology that deprives women of their value and sense of self-worth once they get old. The speakers' voice is much more intelligent and critical than the placid voice of the bride-to-be in "The Happiest Girl in the World." As many critics have noted, in particular, Eulalie in "A Castaway" launches a series of eloquent attacks on the contemporary discourse of the prostitute as the "great social evil" epitomized by the Contagious Diseases Acts (Brown, "Economical Representations"; Leighton, "Because men"; Walkowitz; Sutphin; Slinn), demonstrating a clear self-awareness that defies an identification with the prevalent discursive representations on the fallen woman. Similarly, the spinster in "Faded" is well aware of the continuity between her younger self in the painting and her present old self, despite the ideology imposed upon women which puts a woman's life apart according to the value attributed to their young age. However, both Eulalie and the spinster fail to separate themselves from the representations that finally contain them. As both poems examine the relationship between the self and the

cultural representation, the image of reflection is used as the key trope. Leighton insightfully argues that "The mirror of the external view" (*Victorian Women Poets* 190) is the key to Webster's understanding of the womanhood as a discursive construction:

> The mirror—that most female of Victorian images—gives Webster a figure for the social and ideological frames which trap women in conventional, incompatible pictures, but from which she also refuses to offer any introspective escape. . . . The self is thus presented as essentially a creature mirrored in the looking-glass of society, and Webster's poems do not try to break that glass; they only set it at different angles. (186)

Leighton's reading of the mirror greatly helps us to understand Webster's dramatic monologues in terms of the relationship between the self and the discursive representation. The image of the mirror as a reflection not of the inner self but the external ideology is extended to the painting in "Faded," a cultural representation of a young woman fragmented from the woman's real life. For both Eulalie and the spinster, all they can see in the reflection is the culturally constructed representation rather than their very selves, indicating the dangerous conflation between the self and the representation. However, what Webster finally dramatizes is the speakers' keen awareness of the gap between the self and the reflection, the uncharted, irrepresentable territory of the female self that defies identification with the cultural prescription. Webster's dramatic monologue demonstrates the subject not in terms of the "inner self" which exists apart and opposed to the society, but as a social construction subject to the social discourse. However, Webster portrays a form of self-consciousness that perceives the production of the self and strives to remain in defiance to the representation that dictates the subject. Although she does not provide her speakers with any socioeco-

nomic breakthrough, she tenaciously raises the issue of the interplay, and the distance, between the self and the social powers of discourse, and keeps the speakers in a persistent critical position that makes them question and problematize the relationship. The speakers' dynamism of oscillation is what ultimately enables the compelling social critique of Webster's dramatic monologue. Ultimately, as a performance, Webster's dramatic monologue portrays the construction of the female subjectivity as the subject's self-conscious oscillation between opposing and conforming to the ideological representation—ever critically aware of the immeasurably close, but not nonexistent, distance between herself and her reflection.

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ABSTRACT

The Dynamics of Oscillation between the Self and the Representation:
The Construction of Female Subjectivity in Augusta Webster's Dramatic Monologue Form

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Recent criticism on the dramatic monologue has redefined the genre as a form of interrogation of the relationship between the self and the social discourse. In this revisionist approach, the (re)discovery of the women writers' dramatic monologue has claimed a key position in developing critical discussion. Augusta Webster's *Portraits* dramatizes its female speakers' interplay with the contemporary Victorian ideology as they problematize the cultural representations of women. Whereas each speaker articulates her anxiety and frustration from the cultural discourse, she also delineates her susceptibility to the discursive representation as her speech betrays internalized sentiments and desires inculcated by the very social norms she strives to resist. "The Happiest Girl in the World" portrays the speaker's ambivalent attitude toward her imminent marriage. The bride-to-be's inadequacy and inability to articulate her feelings for her betrothed and marriage tellingly disclose the unsettling interplay between self and society, in which the self is never separate from the ideological discourse even when it self-consciously seeks to be apart from it. The speaker oscillates between the discursive representation that reproduces her and the uncharted territory of the self-aware dissonance from the discursive prescription. By dramatizing

the contradiction of the self, Webster enables a critical understanding of the construction of the female subject.

Key Words Augusta Webster, dramatic monologue, Victorian women's poetry, female subjectivity, female representation